Russian Short Stories

The Army Ensign

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The Army Ensign by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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Prologue

Last summer one of my nearest friends inherited from an aunt of his a small farm in the Z—— district of the Government of Podol. After looking through the things that had fallen to his lot, he found, in an attic, a huge iron-bound trunk stuffed with old-fashioned books, with the letter “T” printed like a “CH,” from the yellowish leaves of which came a scent of mouldiness, of dried-up flowers, of mice, and of camphor, all blended together. The books were chiefly odd volumes of faded Russian authors of the early nineteenth century, including an epistolary manual and the Book of Solomon. Among this assortment were letters and papers, mostly of a business nature and wholly uninteresting. But one rather thick bundle wrapped up in grey packing paper and tied carefully with a piece of string, roused in my friend a certain curiosity. It proved to contain the diary of an infantry officer, named Lapshine, and several leaves of a beautiful, rough Bristol paper, decorated with irises and covered with a small feminine handwriting. At the end of these pages was the signature “Kate,” but many of them bore the single letter “K.” There could be no doubt that Lapshine’s diary

and Kate's letters were written at about the same time and concerned the same events, which took place some twenty-five years or so ago. Not knowing what to do with his find, my friend posted the package to me. In offering it now to my readers, I must confess that my own pen has dealt only very slightly with it, merely correcting the grammar here and there and obliterating numerous affectations in quotation marks and brackets.

I

September 5th.

Boredom, boredom, and again boredom! Is my whole life going to pass in this grey, colourless, lazy, crawling way? In the morning, squad drill and this sort of thing:

"Efimenko, what is a sentry?"

"A sentry is an inviolable person, your Honour."

"Why is he an inviolable person?"

"Because no one dares to touch him, your Honour."

"Sit down. Tkatchouk, what is a sentry?"

"A sentry is an inviolable person, your Honour."

And so on endlessly.

Then dinner at the mess. Vodka, stale stories, dull conversations about the difficulty nowadays of passing from the rank of captain to that of colonel, long discussions about examinations, and more vodka. Someone finds a marrowbone in his soup and this is called an event to be celebrated by extra drinks. Then two hours of leaden sleep, and in the evening,

once more, the same inviolable person and the same endless "fi-i-r-ing in file."

How often have I begun this very diary! It always seemed to me, I don't know why, that destiny must at last throw into my everyday life some big, unusual event which will leave indelible traces on my soul for the rest of my life. Perhaps it will be love? I often dream of some beautiful, unknown, mysterious woman, whom I shall meet some day—a woman who is weary and distressed as I am now.

Haven't I a right to my own bit of happiness? I am not stupid; I can hold my own in society. I am even rather witty, if I am not feeling shy and happen to have no rival close at hand. As to my appearance, naturally it is difficult for me to judge it, but I think I am not too bad, though on rainy autumn mornings I confess that my own face in the looking-glass strikes me as loathsome. The ladies of our regiment find something of Lermontov's Petchorin about me. However, this merely proves, in the first place, the poorness of the regimental libraries and, secondly, the immortality of the Petchorin type in infantry regiments.

With a dim presentiment of this strip of life in front of me, I've begun my diary several times, intending to note down every small detail so as to live it over again afterwards, if only in memory, as fully and clearly as possible. But day after day passed with the old monotonous sameness. The extraordinary made no start, and, losing all taste for the dry routine of regimental annals, I would throw my diary aside on a shelf for long intervals and then burn it with other rubbish when

changing my quarters.

September 7th.

A whole week has gone by already since I got back from manoeuvres. The season for open-air work has begun and squad after squad is told off to dig beetroots on the estates of the neighbouring landowners. Only our squad and the eleventh are left. The town is more dead-and-alive than ever. This dusty, stuffy heat, this daytime silence of a provincial town, broken only by the frantic bawling of cocks, gets on my nerves and depresses me.

Really, I am beginning to miss the nomad life of manoeuvres which struck me as so unendurable at the time. How vividly the not very complicated pictures of Army movements come back to my memory, and what a softening charm memory gives to them! I can see it all clearly now: Early morning … the sun not yet risen. A cold sky looks down at the rough, old bell tent, full of holes; the morning stars scarcely twinkle with their silvery gleam … the bivouac has livened up and is bustling with life. One hears the sounds of running about, the undertone of angry voices, the crack of rifles, the neighing of wagon horses. You make a desperate effort and crawl out from under the hairy blanket which has become white from the night dew. You crawl straight out into the open air because you cannot stand in the low tent, but only lie or sit down. The orderly, who has just been beating a devil's tattoo with his boot on the samovar (which of course is strictly forbidden), hurries off to get water, bringing it straight from the stream in a little brass camp kettle. Stripped to the waist, you wash in the open air, and a

slight, fine, rosy steam curls up from your hands, face, and body. Here and there, between the tents, officers have improvised fires from the very straw on which they have spent the night, and are now sitting round them, shrivelled up from cold and gulping down hot tea. A few minutes later, the tents are struck, and there, where just now “the white linen town” had sported itself, are merely untidy heaps of straw and scraps of paper. The din of the roused bivouac deepens. The whole field is swarming with soldiers’ figures in white Russian blouses, their grey overcoats rolled over their shoulders. At first glance there seems absolutely no order in this grey, ant-like agitation, but the trained eye will note how gradually thick heaps are formed out of it and how gradually each of these heaps extends into a long regular line. The last of the late comers rush up to their squads, munching a piece of bread on the way or fastening the strap of a cartridge case. In another minute the squads, their rifles clinking against each other, form into a regular enormous square in the middle of the field.

And then the tiring march of from thirty to forty versts. The sun rises higher and higher. About eight o’clock the heat makes itself felt; the soldiers begin to be bored, their marching becomes slack, and they sing listlessly the regular marching songs. Every minute the dust gets thicker, enfolding in a long yellow cloud the whole column which extends for a full verst along the road. The dust falls in brown layers on the soldiers’ shirts and faces and, through this background, their teeth and the whites of their eyes flash as if they were negroes. In the thick dusty column it is difficult to distinguish a private from

an officer. Also, for the time being, the difference of rank is modified, and one cannot help getting acquainted with the Russian soldier, with his shrewd outlook on all sorts of things—even on complicated things like manoeuvres—with his practical good sense and his adaptability under all sorts of conditions, with his biting word-pictures and expressions seasoned, as they are, with a rough spiciness to which one turns a deaf ear. What do we meet on the road? A Ukrainian in large white trousers is walking lazily beside a pair of grey shorthorns and, on the roadside, a pedlar, a velvety field, ploughed for the winter crop. Everything invites investigating questions and remarks, impregnated either with a deep, almost philosophical, understanding of simple everyday life, or with pointed sarcasm, or with an irrepressible stream of gaiety.

It is getting dark when the regiment nears the place for its night camp. One sees the cooks already round the large smoky squad cauldrons placed in a field aside from the road. “Halt! Pile arms!” In a twinkling the field is covered with stately files of little wigwams. And then, an hour or two later, you are once more lying under the canvas, full of holes, through which you see the twinkling stars and the dark sky, while your ears note the gradual quieting down of the sleeping camp. But still, for a long time, you catch from the distance separate sounds, softened by the sad quietude of evening: at times the monotonous scraping of a harmonica reaches your ear, sometimes an angry voice, undoubtedly the sergeant-major’s, sometimes the sudden neigh of a colt … and the hay, under one’s head, blends its delicate aroma with the almost bitter

smell of the dewy grass.

September 8th.

Today, my squad's commandant, Vassili Akinfievitch, asked me whether I should like to go with him to the autumn work. He has arranged for the squad very advantageous terms with Mr. Obolianinov's manager—almost two and a half kopecks a pood. The work will consist of digging the beetroot for the local sugar factory. This does not tire the soldiers, who do it very willingly. All these circumstances had probably put the captain in such a rainbow mood, that he not only invited me to go with him to the work, but even, in the event of my accepting, offered me a rouble and a half a day out of the money payable to himself. No other squad commandant had ever shown such generosity towards his subalterns.

I have rather curious, I should say rather mixed, feelings towards Vassili Akinfievitch. In the service I find him insupportable. There he parades all his angry rudeness almost conscientiously. At squad drill he thinks nothing of shouting out before the men at a young officer:

"Lieutenant, please take hold of your men. You walk like a deacon in a procession."

Even if it's funny, that sort of thing is cruel and tactless.

To the men, Vassili Akinfievitch metes out justice with his own fists, a measure which not one of the platoon commanders would ever dare to take. The men like him, and, what is more important than anything else, believe his word. They all know very well that he will not draw a kopeck out of the ration

money, but will be more likely to add something like twenty-five roubles a month out of his own pocket, and that he will permit no one under him to be wronged, but on the contrary will take up the cudgels for him even with the colonel. The men know all this and I am sure that in the event of war they would all follow to the last Vassili Akinfievitch, without hesitation, even to obvious death.

I dislike particularly his exaggerated horror of everything "noble." In his mind the word "nobility" suggests the impression of stupid dandyism, unnaturalness, utter incapacity in the service, cowardice, dances and the guards. He can't even pronounce the word "nobility" without a shade of the most bitter sarcasm, drawling it out to its last letter. However, one must add that Vassili Akinfievitch has been toiling up from the ranks step by step. And at the period when he received his commission, the unfortunate rankers had a rough time of it with the little aristocrats of the mess.

He finds it hard to make friends, as every inveterate bachelor does, but when he takes a fancy to someone he opens, with his purse, his naive, kindly, and clean soul. But even when opening his soul, Vassili Akinfievitch puts no check on his language—this is one of his worst traits.

I think he rather likes me, in his way. As a matter of fact, I am not such a bad officer of the line. When I am hard up, I borrow from him freely and he never duns me. When we are off duty he calls me "Army Ensign." This odd rank died out of the service long ago, but old officers like to use it playfully in memory of their youth.

Sometimes I feel sorry for him, sorry for a good man whose life has been absorbed in the study of a thin Army Regulation book and in minute attention to regimental routine. I am sorry for the poorness of his mental outlook, which allows him no interest in anything beyond his narrow horizon. In a word, I feel the same sort of sorrowful pity for him that comes to one involuntarily when one looks long and attentively into the eyes of a very intelligent dog.

Here I pull myself up! Am I aiming at anything myself? Does my captive thought really struggle so impatiently? At any rate, Vassili Akinfievitch has done something in his life; he has two St. George's on his breast and the scar of a Circassian sabre on his forehead. As for the men under him, they have such fat merry mugs that it makes one cheerful to look at them. Can I say as much for myself?

I said that I would go to the digging with pleasure. Perhaps it will be a distraction? The manager has a wife and two daughters, two or three landowners live near. Who knows? there may be a little romance!

Tomorrow we start.

September 11th.

We arrived this morning at the railway station of Konski Brod. The manager of the estate, advised of our coming by telegram, had sent a carriage to meet Vassili Akinfievitch and myself. My word! I never drove in anything so smart in my life before. It was a four-in-hand coach, magnificent horses, cushiony tyres, studded harness, driven by a healthy-looking lad, who wore an

oilcloth cap and a scarf round his waist. It is about eight versts to Olkhovatka. The road is perfect and smooth, level, straight as an arrow, lined on both sides with thick pyramid-like poplars. On the way, we constantly met long files of carts loaded, to the very top, with cloth bags full of sugar. Apropos of this, Vassili Akinfievitch tells me that the output of the Olkhovatka factory is about 100,000 poods of sugar every year. That is a respectable figure, particularly in view of the fact that Obolianinov is the sole proprietor of the business.

The manager met us at the farm buildings. He has a German surname, Berger, but there's nothing German about his appearance or his accent. In my opinion, he's more like Falstaff, whom I saw somewhere at an exhibition. I think it was in Petersburg, when I went there to pass my unlucky examination at the Academy of the General Staff. He is extraordinarily fat, the fat almost transparent; it shines on his flabby cheeks, which are covered with a network of small red veins. His hair is short, straight, and grizzly; his moustache sticks out on each side in warrior-like brushes; he wears a short imperial under his lower lip. Beneath the thick, dishevelled eyebrows his quick, sly eyes are oddly narrowed by the tautness of the checks and cheekbones. The lips, particularly the smile, reveal a merry, sensual, jolly, very observant man. I think he is deaf, because he has a habit of shouting when he talks to one.

Berger seemed pleased at our arrival. To people like him a listener and a boon companion are more necessary than air. He kept running up to one or the other of us, and seizing us round

the waist, would repeat: “Welcome, gentlemen, you are welcome.”

To my amazement, Vassili Akinfievitch liked him. I did, too.

Berger showed us into a pavilion where four rooms had been prepared for us, provided with everything necessary and unnecessary on such a large scale that we might have been coming to spend three years there instead of a month. The captain was apparently pleased with these attentions from the owner of the place. But once, when Berger opened a drawer of his writing-table and showed a whole box of long, excellent cigars, placed there for us, Vassili Akinfievitch grumbled in an undertone:

“This is a bit too much. … This is ‘nobility’ and all that sort of thing.”

Incidentally, I have forgotten to mention his habit of adding “and all that sort of thing” to almost every word he says. And, taking him all round, he is not exactly an eloquent captain.

While placing us, so to speak, in possession, Berger was very fussy and shouted a great deal. We did our best to thank him. Finally, he seemed to get tired, and, wiping his face with an enormous red handkerchief, he asked us if there was anything else we wanted. We, of course, hastened to assure him that we had more than enough. On leaving us, Berger said:

“I’ll put a boy at your disposal at once. You will be kind enough to order for yourself breakfast, lunch, dinner, and supper according to your wishes. The butler will come to you every evening for this purpose. Our wine-cellar, too, is at your

disposal."

We spent the whole day in installing the soldiers, with their rifles and ammunition, in empty sheds. In the evening the groom brought us cold veal, a brace of roast snipe, a sort of tart with pistachio nuts, and several bottles of red wine. We had scarcely seated ourselves at the table when Berger appeared.

"You're at dinner. That's first rate," he said. "I've brought you a little bottle of old Hungarian. My dead father had it in his cellar for twenty years. ... We had our own estate near Gaissina. ... Make no mistake about us, we Bergers are the lineal descendants of the Teutonic Knights. As a matter of fact, I have the right to the title of Baron, but what good would it be to me? The arms of the nobility require gilt, and that has vanished long ago from ours. You're welcome here, defenders of the throne and the Fatherland."

However, judging by the measures of precaution with which he extracted the musty bottle from a side pocket of his nankin jacket, I am inclined to think that the old Hungarian was preserved in the master's cellar and not at all "on our own estate near Gaissina." The wine was really magnificent. It is true that it completely paralyses one's feet, deprives one's gestures of their ordinary expressiveness, and makes the tongue sticky, but one's head remains clear all the time and one's spirits gay.

Berger tells stories funnily and with animation. He chattered the whole evening about the landlord's income, the luxury of his life in Petersburg, his orangery, his stables, the salaries he

paid to his employees. At first Berger represented himself as the head manager of the business. But half an hour later he let the cat out of the bag. It seems that among the managers of the estate and the employees at the factory, Falstaff occupies one of the humblest positions. He is merely the overseer of the farm of Olkhovatka, just an accountant with a salary of nine hundred roubles a year and everything found except his clothes.

“Why should one man have such a lot?” the captain asked naively, apparently struck by the colossal figures of income and expenditure that Falstaff was pouring out so generously.

Falstaff made a cunning face.

“Everything will go to the only daughter. Well, there you are, young man”—he gave me a playful dig in the ribs with his thumb. “Make up your mind to marry, and then don’t forget the old man.”

I asked with the careless air of one who has seen too much:

“And is she pretty?”

Falstaff grew purple with laughter.

“Ha, ha! He’s biting. Excellent, my warrior. Excellent. Prepare to rush—rush! *Tra-ta-ta-ta*. I like the military way.” Then suddenly, as if a spring had been pressed, he stopped laughing. “How can I answer you? It depends on one’s taste. She is … too subtle … too thinnish …”

“Nobility,” put in the captain with a grimace.

“As much as you like of that. And she’s proud. She doesn’t want

to know any of the neighbours. Oh, and she's unmanageable. The servants dread her more than fire. Not that she's one to shout at you or rebuke you. There's none of that about her. With her it's just: 'Bring me this … Do this … Go!' and all so coldly, without moving her lips."

"Nobility," said the captain, putting his nose in the air spitefully.

We sat like this till eleven o'clock.

Towards the end, Falstaff was quite knocked out and went to sleep on his chair, snoring lightly and with a peaceful smile round his eyes. We woke him up with difficulty and he went home, respectfully supported under the elbow by our boy. I have forgotten to mention that he is a bachelor, a fact which, to tell the truth, upsets my own plans.

It's an odd fact how terribly a day at a new place drags and, at the same time, how few impressions remain from it. Here I am writing these lines and I seem to have been living in Olkhovatka for a long, long time, two months at least, and my tired memory cannot recall any definite event.

September 12th.

Today I have been looking over the whole place. The owner's house, or, as the peasants about here call it, the Palace, is a long stone building of one storey, with plate-glass windows, balconies, and two lions at the entrance. Yesterday it did not strike me as so big as it did today. Flowerbeds lie in front of the house; the paths separating them are spread with reddish sand. In the middle there is a fountain with shiny globes on

pedestals, and a light prickly hedge runs round the front. Behind the house are the pavilion, the offices, the cattle and fowl-yards, the stud boxes, the barns, the orangery, and, last of all, a thick shady garden of some eleven acres, with streams, grottos, pretty little hanging bridges, and a lake with swans.

It is the first time in my life that I have lived side by side with people who spend on themselves tens, perhaps even hundreds, of thousands, people who scarcely know the meaning of “not able to do something.”

Wandering aimlessly through the garden, I could not take my thoughts off this, to me, incomprehensible, strange, and at the same time attractive existence. Do they think and feel just as we do? Are they conscious of the superiority of their position? Do the trifles which burden our lives ever come into their heads? Do they know what we go through when we come in contact with their higher sphere? I am inclined to think that all that means nothing to them, that they ask themselves no inquisitive questions, that the grey monotony of our lives seems just as uninteresting to them, just as natural and ordinary for us, as for example the sight of my orderly, Parkhomenko, is to me. All this, of course, is in the nature of things, but for some reason or other it hurts my pride. I am revolted by the consciousness that in the society of these people, polished up and well-glossed by a hundred years of luxurious habits and refined etiquette, *I*, yes *I*, no one else, will appear funny, odd, unpleasant even by my way of eating, and making gestures, by my expressions and appearance, perhaps even by my tastes and acquaintances—in a word, in me rings

the protest of a human being who, created in the image and resemblance of God, has either lost one and the other in the Flight of Time, or has been robbed of them by someone.

I can imagine how Vassili Akinfievitch would snort if I read these reflections to him.

September 13th.

Although today is the fatal number—the devil's dozen—it has turned out very interesting.

I have been wandering about the garden again. I don't remember where I read a comparison of Nature in autumn with the astonishing, unexpected charm which sometimes permeates the faces of young women who are condemned to a swift and certain death from consumption. Today I cannot get this strange comparison out of my head.

There is in the air a strong and delicate aroma of fading maple trees, which is like the bouquet of good wine. One's feet bruise the dead yellow leaves which lie in thick layers over the path. The trees have a bright and fantastic covering as though decked out for a banquet of death. Green branches, surviving here and there, are curiously blended with autumn tints of lemon, or straw, or orange, or pink and blood-crimson, sometimes passing into mauve and purple. The sky is dense and cold, but its cloudless blue caresses the eye. And in all this bright death-feast one catches an indefinable, languid sadness which contracts one's heart in a pain that is lingering and sweet.

I was walking along a pathway beneath acacias, interlaced so as to form a thick, almost dark arch. Suddenly my ear caught a

woman's voice saying something with great animation and laughter. On a seat, just where the thick wall of acacias curved into something like an alcove, sat two young girls (I took them for girls at once and later on I found that I was right). I could not see their faces very well, but I noticed that the eldest, a brune, had the provoking, luxuriant appearance of a Ukrainian, and that the younger, who looked like a "flapper," was wearing a white silk handkerchief negligently thrown on her head with one corner pulled down on her forehead, thus concealing the upper part of the face. All the same, I succeeded in catching a glimpse of laughing pink lips and the gay shining of her white teeth as, without noticing my presence, she went on telling something, probably very amusing, in English to her companion.

For some time I hesitated. Shall I go on, or shall I go back? If I go on, shall I salute them or not? Once more I was overwhelmed by yesterday's doubts of my plebeian soul. On the one hand I was thinking, if they are not the hosts of this place, these girls are probably guests, and in a way, I, too, am a guest, and therefore on an equal footing. But on the other hand, does Hermann Hoppe permit bowing to unknown ladies in his rules of etiquette? Won't my bowing seem odd to these girls, or, what will be still worse, won't they regard it as the respectfulness of an employee, of "a hired man." Each point of view seemed to me equally dreadful.

However, after thinking it over like this, I walked on. The dark one was the first to catch the rustle of leaves under my feet and she quickly whispered something to the girl in the silk dress,

indicating me with her eyes. As I came up to them, I raised my hand to the peak of my cap without looking at them, I felt, rather than saw, that they both slowly and almost imperceptibly bent their heads. They watched me as I moved away. I knew this by the sense of awkwardness and discomfort which attentive eyes fixed on my back always give me. At the very end of the alley I turned round. At the same second, as it often happens, the girl with the white handkerchief glanced in my direction. I heard some kind of exclamation in English and then a burst of sonorous laughter. I blushed. Both the exclamation and the laughter were certainly intended for me.

In the evening Falstaff came to us again, this time with some wonderful cognac, and once more he told us something incredible about his ancestors who had taken part in the Crusades. I asked him quite carelessly:

“Do you know who those two young girls are, whom I met in the garden today? One is a fresh-looking brune, and the other is almost a little girl in a light grey dress.”

He gave a broad grin, wrinkling up the whole of his face and causing his eyes to completely disappear. Then he shook his finger at me slyly:

“Ah, my son of Mars, so you’re on the fishhook! Well, well, well! … Don’t get angry. I’ll stop, I will really. But all the same, it’s interesting. … Well, I suppose I must satisfy your curiosity. The younger one is our young lady, Katerina Andreevna, the one I told you about, the heiress. You can’t call her a little girl. It’s only to look at she’s so thin, but she’s a good twenty years old.”

“Really?”

“Yes, if not more. Oh, she’s such an imp. But the little brunette, that’s the one to my taste, all eggs and cream and butter.” Falstaff smacked his lips carnivorously. “That’s the kind of little pie I love. Her name is Lydia Ivanovna—such a kind, simple girl and dying to get married. She’s a distant relation of the Obolianinovs, but she’s poor, so she’s just staying here as a friend.… Oh, well, damn them all!” he wound up suddenly, waving his hand, “let’s get on with the cognac.”

Inwardly I had to agree with this last opinion. What do I care about those girls, whom I saw today, when tomorrow we may be off in different directions and may never hear of each other again?

Late in the night, after Falstaff had left us (the boy again balancing him respectfully, this time by the waist), when I was already in bed, Vassili Akinfievitch came to me, half undressed, with slippers on his bare feet and a candle in his hand.

“Well, young man,” he said, yawning and rubbing his hairy chest, “will you explain one thing to me? Here we are, fed on all sorts of delicatessen and given their best old wine to drink and a boy at our disposal, and cigars and all that sort of thing, but they won’t invite us to their own table, will they? Now why is this? Kindly solve that problem.”

Without waiting for my answer, he went on in a sarcastic tone:

“Because, my dear old chap, all these ‘Nobility’ people and all that sort of thing are most refined diplomats. Ye-e-es. What is their way of doing it? I made a good study of their sort on

different voluntary work. I know the type. He will be amiable to you and will serve you up dinners" (justice compels me to add that the captain mispronounced the word "serve") "and cigars, and all that sort of thing, but all the same you feel that he looks on you as on a low worm; and notice, Lieutenant, it's only the real great 'alistocrats'" (here, as if out of irony, he purposely mutilated the word) "who have this attitude towards our fellow men. The simpler sort, the more doubtful ones, swagger and put on more airs. Immediately that type will sport an eyeglass, round his lips, and imagine that he's a bird. But as for the real sort, the first thing with them is simplicity—because there's no reason for them to put on airs when right in their own blood they feel scorn for our fellow men … and it all comes out very naturally and charmingly, and all that sort of thing."

Having finished this accusing speech, Vassili Akinfievitch turned round and went off to his room.

Well, perhaps he's right in his own way, but all the same it seems to me rather bad taste to laugh at strangers behind their backs.

September 14th.

Today I met them both again in the garden. They walked with their arms round each other's waists. The little one, her head on her companion's shoulder, was humming something with half-closed eyes. Seeing them it suddenly occurred to me that these chance rambles of mine might be misinterpreted. I turned quickly into a side-path. I don't know that they saw me, but apparently I must choose another time for my walks or risk

seeming an army intruder.

September 15th.

Lydia Ivanovna started this evening for the station. She will probably not return to Olkhovatka. First of all, because she has been followed by a respectable quantity of luggage, secondly, because she and the daughter of the house said goodbye to each other rather long and affectionately. Apropos of this, I saw for the first time from my window André Alexandrovitch himself with his wife. He's quite a fine-looking type, stately, broad-shouldered, with the cut of an old Hussar; his grey hair is worn *à la russe*, his chin is clean-shaven, his moustache long, downy and silvery, and his eyes are like a hawk's, only blue, but just the same as the hawk's—round, sunken, motionless and cold. His wife gives one the impression of a frightened and modest person. She holds her head a little on one side, and a smile, half guilty and half pitiful, is always on her lips. The face is yellow but kind. In her youth she was probably very beautiful, but now she looks much older than her age. There was also a bent old woman on the balcony. She wore a black headdress and greenish curls, and she came out leaning on a stick, and hardly able to drag her feet after her. She wanted, I think, to say something, but she began coughing, shook her stick in a despairing sort of way and disappeared.

September 16th.

Vassili Akinfievitch has asked me to look after the work until he can get rid of his fit of Balkan rheumatism,

"Pay particular attention," he said, "to the delivery of the

beetroot; the soldiers are already complaining because the foreman here gives them overweight. To tell the truth, I am rather afraid that in the end there'll be trouble over this."

The soldiers have been working in threes. They have already practically finished their contract. One digs out the beetroot from the ground with a shovel, while two cut it with knives and clean it. These sets of three are usually formed from soldiers of the same strength and skill. There's no point in choosing a bad one, as he would only be in the way of the others.

I've read somewhere or other, I think in the *Indicator*, the reflections of a leisurely thinker, who says that there is no advantage at all in this sort of work: that clothes get torn, and soldiers undisciplined. This is absolutely false. Never is there such a confident, almost relation-like feeling between officers and privates as at this sort of free work. And if one admits that the soldier needs holidays during his hard military training, there is no better rest for him than the toil in the fields which he loves. But all the money earned in this way must go to the soldiers without any middleman … each knows where the shoe pinches. And our people are admirable workers; hired peasants wouldn't do half the work. There's only one exception, Zamochnikov, who, as usual, does nothing. Zamochnikov is the spoilt favourite of the whole squad, from the captain down to the last private, Nikifor Spassob (this same Spassob, with his lame leg and the white spot on his right eye, has been for the last four years a walking and a crying reproach to the military service). It is true that during his whole period of service Zamochnikov has been unable to master the vowels in the

alphabet and has shown a really exceptional stupidity in regard to book-learning, but you could not find in the whole regiment such a spirited singing-leader, such a good teller of stories, such a jack-of-all-trades and a Merry Andrew to boot. He apparently knows what his role is very well and looks upon it in the light of a military duty. On march he sings almost without stopping, and his lashing, spirited talk often wrings a laugh of appreciation from the tired soldiers and gives them a moral shakeup. Vassili Akinfievitch, though he keeps Zamochnikov under arms more often than the rest, for which Zamochnikov bears him no grudge, confessed to me once that a stirrer-up like him is a perfect treasure in wartime and difficult circumstances.

Zamochnikov, however, is no mere clown and sham, and for this I like him particularly. Life in him simply boils up unrestrainedly and never allows him to sit quiet for a minute.

Here he was today, passing from work-party to work-party and finally arriving at a women's department. He started a long dialogue with the Ukrainians, which made the soldiers near him leave their work and roll on the ground with laughter. I can hear from a distance his imitations of the brisk, shrill quarrels of women, and then again the lazy talk of an old Ukrainian. On catching sight of me, he puts on a preoccupied look and fumbles on the ground. "Well, my fellow-country-women," he asks, "which of you has sent my shovel to perdition?" I shout at him and endeavour to make my face severe. He stands to attention, carrying himself, as he always does before an officer, with a graceful vigour, but in his kind

blue eyes there still trembles the little fire of his interrupted merriment.

September 17th.

Our acquaintance has taken place, but under exceptionally comic conditions. Why should I hide it from myself? I secretly longed for this acquaintance, but if I could have foreseen that it would happen as it happened today, I should have refused it.

The stage was again the garden. I have already written that there is a lake; it has a little round island in the middle, overgrown with thick bushes. On the shore, facing the house, is a rather small wharf and near it a flat-bottomed boat is moored.

In this boat Katerina Andreevna was sitting as I passed. Holding the sides of the boat with both hands and bending forward first on one side and then on the other, she was trying to balance and shove off the heavy boat which had stuck fast on the slimy bottom of the lake. She wore a sailor costume, open at the throat, allowing one to see her thin white neck and even her thin little collarbones, which stood out under the muscular tension. A small gold chain hid itself in her dress. But I gave her only a passing glance, and, having once more given her a half-salute, I turned away with my usual modest dignity. At that moment a girl's voice, fresh and merry, called out suddenly:

"Will you please be so kind—"

At first I thought this exclamation was meant for someone else who was walking behind me, and involuntarily I glanced back.

She was looking at me, smiling and nodding emphatically.

“Yes, yes, yes—you. Will you be so kind as to help me to shove off this wretched boat? I’m not strong enough by myself.”

I made her a most gallant bow, bending my body forward and lifting my left leg back, after which I ran eagerly down to the water and made another bow just as ceremonious as the first. I must have looked fine, I imagine. The lady was now standing up in the boat, still laughing and saying:

“Push it away just a little … then I’ll manage it myself.”

I seize the bow of the boat with both hands, with my legs spread wide apart so as to preserve my balance, then I warn her with refined politeness:

“Will you be kind enough to sit down, Mademoiselle … the push may be a very vigorous one.”

She sits down, stares at me with laughing eyes, and says:

“Really, I’m ashamed to trespass like this on your kindness.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, Mademoiselle.”

The fact that she is watching me gives my movements a certain gracefulness. I’m a good gymnast and nature has given me a fair amount of physical strength. But, in spite of my efforts, the boat does not stir.

“Please don’t take so much trouble,” I hear a tender little voice saying. “It’s probably too heavy and it may hurt you. Really, I—”

The sentence hangs unfinished in the air. Her doubt of my strength gives it a tenfold force. A mighty effort, a push, a

crash, the boat flies off like an arrow, while I, in accordance with all the laws of equilibrium, splash full length into the mud.

When I get up I find my face and hands and my snow-white tunic, worn for the first time that morning, everything covered in one long layer of brown, sticky, reeking mud. At the same time I see that the boat is gliding swiftly to the very middle of the lake and that the girl, who had fallen backwards when I shoved off, is getting up. The first object that jumps to her eye is myself. A frantic laugh rings through the whole garden and echoes through the trees. I get out my handkerchief and pass it, confusedly, first over my tunic and then over my face. But in time I realise that this only smudges the mud into me worse than before and gives me a still more pitiable appearance. Then I make an heroic attempt to burst out laughing myself over the comedy of my miseries, and produce some sort of idiotic neighing. Katerina Andreevna rocks with laughter more than ever, and is hardly able to pronounce her words:

"Go … go … quickly. … You … will catch cold. …"

I run off at full speed from this accursed place, run the whole way back to the house, while in my ears there still rings that merciless, ceaseless laugh.

The captain, as he caught sight of me, merely threw his arms out in astonishment.

"Ni-ce! Well, you are a pretty sight! How the deuce did you manage it?"

I made no answer, banged the door of my room and furiously

turned the lock twice. Alas! now everything is all over forever.

P.S.—Is she pretty or is she not? I was so absorbed in my gallantry (condemn yourself to death, wretched man!) that I hadn't even time to get a good look at her.... Ah, but what does it matter?

Tomorrow, whatever happens, I am going back to the regiment, even if I have to sham being ill. Here I should not be able to live down my disgrace.

Kate to Lydia.

Olkhovatka,

September 18th.

My Dearest Lydia,

Congratulate me quickly. The ice is broken. The mysterious stranger, it seems, is the most amiable in the world, a *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*. The honour of this discovery belongs to me, since you, you little villain, deserted me. There is no one now to keep me out of mischief, which I have had time to get into over and over again.

To begin with, I must confess that yesterday I arranged the capture of my mysterious stranger. I waited in the boat, and, when he passed by, I asked him to shove it off from the shore. Oh, I know perfectly well that you would have stopped short of a trick like that. You ought to have seen the eagerness with which the mysterious stranger rushed up to fulfil my request. But the poor man didn't measure his strength, fell into the water and was covered with filthy mud. He presented the most pitiful and at the same time the most amusing appearance you

could imagine. His cap had fallen on the ground, his hair had slipped down over his forehead, and the mud was pouring from him in streams, while his hands, with the fingers parted, seemed to be petrified. I thought at once: I must not laugh; he will be offended.

It would have been much better not to think at all. I began to laugh, laugh, laugh. … I laughed myself into hysterics. In vain I bit my lips until they bled, and pinched my hand until it hurt. Nothing was of any use. The confused officer took to flight. This wasn't very wise on his part, for I had left the oars behind. I had to float over the roughish water until the wind brought my fragile bark into the reeds. There, by grabbing one after the other with both hands, I succeeded somehow or other in pulling the boat in. But in jumping out I managed to wet my feet and skirt almost up to the knees.

Do you know, I like him very much. A strange presentiment told me that an interesting flirtation would start between us, "l'amour inachevé," as Prévost puts it. There is something about him manly, strong, and at the same time tender. It's nice to have power over a man like that. Apart from this, he's probably very reserved—I mean to say, not gossipy; I don't think he's stupid, but chiefly one divines in his figure and movements robust health and great physical strength. While I was muddling about in the boat, I was seized by a weird, but very attractive thought: I wanted him terribly to take me up in his arms and carry me swiftly, swiftly over the gardens. It would have been no great effort for him, would it, my little Lida?

What a difference there is between him and the people one meets in Petersburg, those dancers and sportsmen in whom one always detects something worn and jaded and disagreeably shameless. My officer is fresh, like a healthy apple, built like a gladiator, at the same time bashful, and, I think, passionate.

Tomorrow, or the day after, I will make advances to him (that's the way, I think, to express it in Russian?) Lidotchka, you must correct all my gallicisms without mercy, as you promised! Really I am ashamed of making mistakes in my own language. That he tumbled so magnificently into the lake doesn't matter a bit. I alone was a witness of the tragedy. It would have been quite another matter if he had been so clumsy in public. Oh, then I should certainly be ashamed of him. This must be our special women's psychology.

Goodbye, my dear little Lida. I kiss you.

Your Kate.

September 19th.

Everything passes in this world—pain, sorrow, love, shame, and in fact it is an extremely wise law. The other day I was sure that if, before my departure, I should happen to meet Katerina Andreevna by any chance I should almost die from shame. But not only have I not left Olkhovatka, but I have even found time to seal a friendship with this bewitching creature. Yes, yes, friendship is exactly the word. Today, at the end of our long, earnest conversation, she herself said this, word for word: "So M. Lapshine, let us be friends, and neither of us will remember this unlucky little story." Of course "this unlucky little story"

meant my adventure with the boat.

Now I know her appearance down to the most delicate details, but I cannot describe her. As a matter of fact I believe this to be generally impossible. Often one reads in novels a description of the heroine: “She had a beautifully regular, classical face, eyes full of fire, a straight, charming little nose and exquisite red lips, behind which gleamed two rows of magnificent pearly teeth.” This is crude to a degree! Does this insipid description give even the slightest hint of that untranslatable combination and reciprocal harmony of features which differentiates one face from all the millions of others?

Here I can see her face in front of me in actual, minute, extraordinarily vivid detail: a full oval of an olive pallor, eyebrows almost straight, very dark and thick, meeting over the ridge of the nose in a sort of dark down, so that it gives them a certain expression of severity; the eyes are large, green, with enormous shortsighted pupils; the mouth is small, slightly irregular, sensual, mocking and proud, with full, sharply chiselled, lips; the dull hair is gathered up at the back of the head in a heavy negligent knot.

I could not go away yesterday. The captain is seriously ill and rubs himself from morning till night with formic acid and drinks a concoction made out of some sort of herbs. It would not be sportsmanlike to desert him while in this state. All the more because the captain’s concoction is nothing but a masked drinking bout.

Last night I went into the garden, without even daring to confess to myself that I secretly hoped to find Katerina

Andreevna there. I don't know whether she saw me pass the gate, or if everything can be put down to chance, but we met face to face on the main path, just as I had emerged on to it from the alley.

The sun was setting, half the sky was reddening, promising a windy morning. Katerina Andreevna wore a white dress, relieved at the waist by a green velvet belt. Against the fiery background of the sunset her fine hair flamed round her head.

She smiled when she saw me, not angrily, rather kindly, and stretched out her hand to me.

"I am partly to blame for what happened yesterday. Tell me, you didn't catch cold, did you?"

The tone of her question is sincere and sympathetic. All my fears vanish. I find myself even daring to risk a joke at my own expense:

"Rubbish, a little mud bath! On the contrary it's very healthy. You're too kind, Mademoiselle."

And we both start laughing in the most simple, sincere way. Honestly, what was there so terrible and shameful in my involuntary fall? Decidedly I don't understand it. …

"No, we can't leave it like this," she says still laughing. "You must have your revenge. Can you row?"

"I can. Mademoiselle."

"Well, come along. Don't keep calling me 'mademoiselle.' But you don't know my name?"

"I know it—Katerina Andreevna."

“Ah, that’s too fearfully long: ‘Ka-te-ri-na’—and on the top of it Andreevna. At home, everyone calls me ‘Kate.’ Call me simply ‘Kate.’ ”

I click my heels together in silent assent.

I pull the boat to the shore. Kate, leaning heavily on my outstretched arm, moves easily over the little seats to the stern. We glide slowly over the lake. The surface is so polished and motionless that it has the appearance of density. Stirred by the faint motion of the boat, little wrinkles behind the stern swim lazily away to left and right, pink under the last rays of the sun; the shore is reflected in the water upside down, but it looks prettier than in reality, with its shaggy white willows, the green of which has not yet been touched by autumn. At a little distance behind us swim a couple of swans, light as fluffs of snow, their whiteness intensified by the dark water.

“You always spend the summer in the country, Mademoiselle Kate?” I ask.

“No, last year we went to Nice, and before that to Baden-Baden. I don’t like Nice; it’s the town of the dying, a sort of cemetery. But I gambled at Monte Carlo, gambled like anything. And you? Have you been abroad?”

“Rather! I have even had adventures.”

“Really? That must be very interesting. Please tell me about them.”

“It was about two years ago in the spring. Our battalion was quartered at a tiny frontier place—Goussiatine. It is generally called the Russian Goussiatine, because at the other side of a

narrow little river, not more than fifty yards in breadth, there is an Austrian Goussiatine, and when I'm talking, by no means without pride, about my trip abroad, it is this very Austrian Goussiatine that I mean.

"Once, having secured the favour of the Inspector of rural police, we made up a rather large party to go over there, a party exclusively composed of officers and regimental ladies. Our guide was a local civilian doctor and he acted as our interpreter. Scarcely had we entered—to express myself in the grand style—alien territory, than we were surrounded by a crowd of Ruthenian ragamuffins. Apropos of this, it was a chance of testing the deep sympathy which our brother Slavs are supposed to feel for us Russians. The urchins followed us to the very doors of the restaurant without ceasing for a second to spatter us with the most choice Russian insults. Austrian Jews were standing in the street in little groups with tasselled fur caps, curls falling over their shoulders, and gaberdines beneath which one could see white stockings and slippers. As soon as we approached them they began to point at us, and in their quick guttural language, with a typical snarl at the end of each sentence, there was something menacing.

"However, we reached the restaurant at last and ordered guliash and massliash; the first is some national meat dish deluged with red pepper and the second a luscious Hungarian wine. While we were eating, a dense crowd of the inhabitants of Goussiatine trooped into the small room and stared, with genuine curiosity, at the foreign visitors. Then three people emerged from the crowd and greeted the doctor, who

immediately introduced them to our ladies. After these, four more came and then about six others. Who these citizens were I have never found out but they probably occupied administrative posts. Among them there was a certain Pan Komissarj and Pan Sub-Komissarj and other Pans as well. They were all good enough to eat guliash and drink massliash with us, and they kept repeating to the ladies: 'At your service, Pane,' and 'We fall at the Pane's feet.'

"At the end Pan Komissarj invited us to stay until the evening, as a subscription ball was to take place that day. We accepted the invitation.

"All went swingingly, and our ladies were enthusiastically whirling in waltzes with their new acquaintances. It is true we were a little surprised at foreign usage: each dancer called a dance for himself and paid the musicians twenty kopecks. We got used to this custom, but we were soon bewildered by a quite unexpected incident.

"One of our party wanted some beer and he mentioned this to one of our new acquaintances—a portly gentleman with a black moustache and magnificent manners; our ladies had decided about him that he must be one of the local magnates. The magnate happened to be an extremely affable man. He shouted: 'At once, gentlemen,' disappeared for a minute, and returned with two bottles of beer, a corkscrew, and a serviette under his arm. The two bottles were opened with such extraordinary skill that our colonel's wife expressed her admiration. To her compliment the magnate replied with modest dignity: 'Oh, that's nothing for me, Madame… I have a post as waiter at this

establishment.' Naturally, after this unexpected confession, our party left the Austrian ball hurriedly, a little informally even."

While I am telling this anecdote Kate laughs sonorously. Our boat doubles round the little island and comes out into a narrow canal over which trees, bending low on each side, form a cool, shadowy arch. Here one catches the sharp smell of marsh; the water looks black as ink and seems to boil under the oars.

"Oh, how nice!" Kate exclaims with a little shiver.

As our conversation is threatening to dry up, I enquire:

"You find it rather dull in the country, don't you?"

"Very dull," Kate answers, and after a short silence, she adds negligently, with a quick, coquettish glance: "Up to now, at all events. In the summer my friend was staying here—I think you saw her, didn't you? and then there was someone to chatter with. ..."

"Have you no acquaintances among the landowners about here?"

"No. Papa won't call on anyone. It's fearfully dull. In the morning I have to read the *Moscow News* aloud to my grandmother. You can't imagine what a bore it is. It's so nice in the garden and I have to read there about conflicts between civilised Powers and about the agricultural crisis ... and sometimes, in despair, I decide to skip some twenty or thirty lines, so that there is no sense at all left. Grandmother, however, never suspects anything and often expresses surprise: 'Do you notice, Kate, that they write quite incomprehensibly

nowadays?'

"Of course I agree: 'Indeed they do, Grandmother, utterly incomprehensibly.' But when the reading is over I feel like a schoolgirl let out for the holidays."

Talking like this we roll along over the lake until it begins to get dark. As we say goodbye, Kate, in a little parenthesis, gives me to understand that she is accustomed to stroll about the garden every morning and every evening.

All this happened yesterday, but I have had no time to write anything in my diary, because I spent the rest of the evening up to midnight in lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling, and giving myself up to unrealisable, impossible reveries which, in spite of their innocence, I am ashamed to put down on paper.

We met again today, already without the least embarrassment, just like old acquaintances. Kate is extraordinarily good and kind. When, in the course of conversation, I expressed, among other things, my regret that the unlucky incident of the boat made me seem comic in her eyes, she stretched out her hand to me with a sincere gesture and pronounced these unforgettable words:

"Let us be friends, M. Lapshine, and let us forget that story."

And I know the kind tone of those words will never be effaced from my memory by words of any other sort for all eternity.

September 20th.

Oh, I was not mistaken! Kate indeed hinted yesterday that we can meet in the garden every morning and every evening. It is a pity though that she was not in a good humour today; the

reason was a bad headache.

She looked very tired and she had black marks under her eyes and her cheeks were paler than usual.

“Don’t take any notice of my health,” she said in reply to my expressions of sympathy. “This will pass. I have got into the bad habit of reading in bed. One gets entranced, without noticing it, and then there comes insomnia. You can’t hypnotise, can you?” she added half jokingly.

I answered that I had never tried, but that I probably could.

“Take my hand,” Kate said, “and look intently into my eyes.”

Gazing into Kate’s large black pupils, I endeavoured to concentrate and gather all my force of will, but my eyes fell confusedly from her eyes to her lips. There was one moment when my fingers involuntarily trembled and gave a faint pressure to Kate’s hand. As if in answer to my unconscious movement, I also felt a faint pressure in return. But naturally this was only by chance, because she immediately withdrew her hand.

“No, you can’t help me. You’re thinking of something quite different.”

“On the contrary, I was thinking of you, Mademoiselle Kate,” I retorted.

“Quite possibly. But doctors never look at one with eyes like that. You are a bad one.”

“I a bad one! God is my witness that no evil thought, even the shadow of an evil thought, has ever come into my head. But

possibly my unlucky face has expressed something utterly different from what I feel."

The strange part of it is that Kate's observation suddenly made me *feel* the woman in her for the first time, and I felt awkward.

So my experiment in hypnotism was a failure. Kate's migraine not only did not vanish but grew worse every minute. When she went away she was probably sorry for the disappointment in my face. She allowed me to hold her hand for a second longer than was necessary.

"I'm not coming in the evening," she said. "Wait until tomorrow."

But how well this was said! What an abyss of meaning a woman can sometimes put into the most ordinary, the most commonplace, sentence! This "wait" I translated like this: "I know that it is a great pleasure for you to see me; it is not unpleasant to me either, but then we can meet each other every day, and there is ever so much time ahead of us—isn't there?" Kate gives me the right to wait for her. At the very thought of it my head swims in transport.

What if mere curiosity, an acquaintance made out of boredom, chance meetings—what if all this were to pass into something deeper and more tender? As I wandered along the garden paths, after Kate's departure, I began to dream about it involuntarily. Anyone may dream about anything, may he not? And I was imagining the springing up between us of a love, at once passionate, timid, and confident, her first love, and though not my first, still my strongest and my last. I was

picturing a stolen meeting at night, a bench bathed in the gentle moonlight, a head confidently leaning upon my shoulder, the sweet, scarcely audible, “I love you,” pronounced timidly in answer to my passionate confession. “Yes, I love you, Kate,” I say with a suppressed sigh, “but we must part. You are rich; I am just a poor officer who has nothing except an immeasurable love for you. An unequal marriage will bring you only unhappiness. Afterwards you would reproach me.” “I love you and cannot live without you,” she answers; “I will go with you to the ends of the earth.” “No, my dear one, we must part. Another life is waiting for you. Remember one thing only, that I will never, never in my life stop loving you.”

The night, the bench, the moon, the drooping trees, the sweet love words, how exalted, old-fashioned, and silly it all sounds! And here, while I am in the act of writing these words, the captain, who has just finished his stirrup-cup, bawls out to me from his bed: “What is it that you are scribbling by the hour. Lieutenant—verses, perhaps? You might honour us with such nobility!”

The captain, I think, hates verses and Nature more than anything in the world. Twisting his mouth sideways, he says sometimes: “Little verses? What earthly use are they?” And he declaims sarcastically:

“In front of me there is a portrait,

Inanimate but in a frame,

In front of it a candle burns …

“Rubbish, fiddlesticks, and all that sort of thing.”

All the same, he is not quite a stranger to art and poetry. After an extra drink or two, he sometimes plays the guitar and sings curious old love songs that one has not heard for the last thirty years.

I shall go to bed at once, though I know I shall have difficulty in getting to sleep. But are not reveries, even the most unrealisable ones, the undeniable and consoling privilege of every mortal?

September 21st.

If anyone had told me that the captain and I would dine with André Alexandrovitch himself, I should have laughed in his face. But, incidentally, I have just come back from the Palace and even now I have between my teeth the same cigar that I started smoking in that magnificent study. The captain is in his room, rubbing himself with the formic acid and grumbling something or other about "nobility and all that sort of thing." However, he is quite bewildered and apparently admits himself a comic figure in the laurels of a toreador and fearless rescuer of one of the fair sex. Probably fate itself has chosen to present us in this place in comic roles: me in my adventure on the lake shore, him in today's exploit.

But I must tell about everything in order. It was about eleven in the morning. I was sitting at the writing-table, busy with a letter to my people, while waiting for the captain, who was to be in for lunch. He came all right, but in a most unexpected state: covered with dust, red, overwhelmed with confusion, and furious.

I looked at him questioningly. He began to pull off his tunic, railing all the time. “This is … this kind of … of stupid thing, and … all that sort of thing! Imagine, I was coming from the digging. Passing through the yard, I see that old woman—well, the mother or grandmother, whoever she is—crawling out from the hedge in front of the Palace. Yes, crawling. She toddles along, quite quietly, when—goodness knows where it came from—a little calf jumps out, an ordinary little calf, not a year old … gallops, you know the way they do, tail up and all that sort of thing … simply a calf’s ecstasy! Yes, that’s what had got hold of him. He sees the old woman and starts for her. She begins shouting and shakes her stick at him, which makes him still worse. There he was, dancing round her, just thinking that she was playing with him. My poor old woman rolls on the ground, half dead with fright and unable even to shriek any longer. I see that one must help, and rush up to her at top speed, chase away the stupid calf and find the old woman lying on the ground, almost breathless and voiceless. I thought that she had perhaps caved in from sheer funk. Well, somehow or other, I lifted her up, shook the dust from her and asked her if she were hurt. All she did was to roll her eyes and groan. Finally she gasped out: ‘Take me home.’ I put an arm round her and managed to drag her up on to the verandah, where we found the chatelaine herself, the wife of our host. She was terrified and burst out: ‘What is the matter with you, Maman? What in the world has happened?’ Between us we got the old woman into an armchair and rubbed her over with some sort of scent. She was right enough and gradually found her breath. Then she started embroidering. I simply didn’t know where to

turn. ‘I was going,’ she says, ‘along the yard, when suddenly a bull flies straight out at me—an enormous mad bull with bloodshot eyes, his mouth all foaming. He came right at me, banged me in the chest with his horns and dashed me on the ground.… Beyond that I remember nothing.’

“Well then, it appeared that I had performed a sort of miracle, that I had sprung at this would-be bull and, on my honour, had practically tossed him over my shoulder. I listened and listened and at last I said: ‘You are mistaken, Madame, it wasn’t a bull, it was just a little calf.’ But I might have talked till I was hoarse. She wouldn’t even listen. ‘It’s all his modesty,’ she said, and that very moment in came their young lady, and she, too, was in a great state. The old woman started telling her the whole comedy over again. The deuce knows what an idiotic business it is. They called me a hero and a saviour, pressed my hands, and all that sort of thing. I listened to them, feeling amused and ashamed, really. Well, I think to myself, I am in for a pretty story and there is nothing to say! I had all the difficulty in the world to get rid of them. What an idiotic affair! I don’t believe one could invent anything sillier.”

We sat down to lunch and, after a few glasses of his mixture, the captain grew calmer. He was just starting for the digging when, suddenly, our boy rushed headlong into the room, his face distorted with awe, his eyes almost jumping out of their sockets.

“The master… the master himself is coming here.”

We too, God knows why, got flurried, rushed about, and began hurriedly to put on the tunics that we had just taken off. And

then, at that very moment, Obolianinov showed himself at the door and stopped with a slight half-bow.

“Gentlemen, I’m afraid that my visit is inconveniencing you,” he said with the most natural and, at the same time, cold amiability. “Please remain just as you were, at home.”

He was wearing loose, light trousers which suited astonishingly well his great height and his curiously youthful appearance. His face is that of a real aristocrat. I have never seen such a regular profile, such a fine eagle nose, such a determined chin and such arrogant lips.

He turned to the captain.

“Will you kindly allow me to express to you my deep gratitude? If it had not been for your daring—”

“Please, no! What do you mean?” the captain answered, quite confused, and waving his hands in incoherent gestures. “I’ve done nothing particular; why thank me? A mere calf. To tell the truth, it was simply awkward and all that sort of thing.”

Obolianinov repeated his ironical, or polite, bow.

“Your modesty does honour to your manliness, Captain. In any case, I consider it my duty to express my gratitude on behalf of my mother and myself.”

At this the captain grew thoroughly ashamed; his face reddened and then seemed to become brown, and he waved his hands more incoherently than ever.

“For goodness’ sake … There is nothing particular in it. Simply a calf. But I—don’t worry about it—I see a calf running—well,

then, I at once… Please don't."

I saw that the captain had become utterly mixed, and hastened to the rescue.

"Kindly take a seat," I said, offering our visitor a chair.

He gave me a fugitive, indifferent glance and a negligent "Merci," but did not sit down and merely placed his hands on the back of the chair.

"I'm very sorry, gentlemen, that we did not meet before," he said as he held out his hand to the captain. "In any case, it's better late than never, isn't it?"

The captain, quite disconcerted, found no reply and merely bowed extremely low as he pressed the white, well-kept hand.

As far as I was concerned, I introduced myself rather curtly: "Lieutenant Lapshine." And then I added, though rather indistinctly: "Delighted… I'm sure. Such an honour."

Finally, I'm not certain which of us came off the better, the captain or I.

"I hope, gentlemen, that you won't refuse to dine with me," said Obolianinov, picking up his hat from the chair. "We dine at seven punctually."

We bowed again and our boss retired with the same magnificent ease of manner with which he had entered.

At seven o'clock we presented ourselves at the Palace. All the way, the captain was grumbling about "nobility" and constantly arranging the order which, for some reason or other, he was wearing on his chest. To all appearances, he was in a most

depressed frame of mind. However, I must admit that I was not feeling very easy myself.

As soon as we reached the house, we were shown into the dining-room, a large, rather dark room, with massive carved oak panels. The master of the house was not there, but only his wife and the old woman, the mother who had been saved from death by the captain. A slight embarrassment arose, naturally chiefly on our side. We had to introduce ourselves. We were asked to sit down. Inevitably, the conversation fastened upon the event of the morning, but, having lasted for about five minutes, it dried up of its own accord, without any hope of revival, and all four of us sat silent, looking at each other, oppressed by our silence.

Luckily Kate, accompanied by her father, came into the room. On seeing me she bit her lip with an expression of surprise and raised her eyebrows. We were introduced. I understood from Kate's glance that no one was to know about our chance meeting in the garden. Dear girl! Of course I will fulfil your silent order.

After dinner, during which Obolianinov had tried in vain to make the captain talk—for some reason or other he paid little attention to me—the old lady expressed a wish to play whist. As the captain never touched cards, I had to make the fourth, and for two hours I had to endure the most dreary boredom. During the first two rubbers, the old lady played more or less correctly. But afterwards her attention wandered. She began to play out of turn and to pick up other people's tricks. When spades were called, she played diamonds.

“But, Maman, you still have a spade,” our host would observe with ironical deference.

“Well, are you going to teach me now?” the old lady would answer in an offended tone. “I am too old to be taught, my dear. If I don’t play a spade, it means that I haven’t got one.”

All the same, a minute later, she would herself lead spades,

“You see, Maman, you have found a spade,” her son would remark with the same shade of benevolent sarcasm, while she was unaffectedly bewildered.

“I can’t make out, my dear, where it came from. I simply can’t make out …”

But I myself played absentmindedly. All the time I was listening for the light footsteps of Kate behind my chair. She, poor girl, struggled for about half an hour in the hope of entertaining the captain, but all her attempts were broken by his stony silence. He only blushed, wiped his perspiring forehead with a check handkerchief, and answered to each question: “Yes, Madame. No, Madame,” At last Kate brought him a whole heap of albums, and pictures in which he became entirely absorbed.

Several times Kate came purposely near the card-table.

Our eyes met each time, and each time I caught in hers a sly and tender little glint. Our acquaintance, suspected by no one, made of us a pair of conspirators, initiated in a common mystery which bound us one to the other with deep, strong ties.

It was already dark when, after finishing the whist and having a smoke in the study, we were on our way home. The captain

was walking ahead of me. Then on the balcony I suddenly felt, yes, exactly felt, the presence of someone. I pulled hard at my cigar and, in the reddish light that rose and lowered, I detected a frock and a dear smiling face.

“What a wise, good little boy! How well he behaved himself!” I heard in a low murmur.

In the darkness my hand seized hers. The darkness gave me suddenly an extraordinary courage. Pressing those cold, dainty little fingers, I raised them to my lips and began to kiss them quickly and avidly. At the same moment, I kept repeating in a happy whisper:

“Kate, my darling… Kate.”

She did not get angry. She only began to pull her hand feebly away and said with feigned impatience:

“You mustn’t. You mustn’t. Go away.… Oh, how disobedient you are! Go, I tell you.”

But when, afraid of making her really angry, I loosened my fingers, she suddenly clung to them and asked:

“What is your name? You haven’t told me yet.”

“Alexei;” I answered.

“Alexei; how nice… Alexei… Alexei… Alesha.…”

Overwhelmed by this unexpected caress, I stretched out my hands impulsively, only to meet emptiness. Kate had already disappeared from the balcony.

Oh, how passionately I love her!

Kate to Lydia.

September 21st.

You will remember, of course, my dear Lidotchka, how Papa was always against “rankers” and how he used to call them sarcastically “army folk.” So you will be doubtless astonished when I tell you that they dined with us today. Papa himself went to the pavilion and invited them. The reason for this sudden change is that the elder of the officers saved the life of my *grand’mère* this morning. From what Grandmother tells us, there was something extraordinary about it. She was passing through the yard, when a mad bull suddenly flew in, the gallant officer dashed between her and the bull—in a word, a regular story in the manner of Spielhagen.

Honestly, I will confess to you that I don’t particularly like Papa’s having invited them. In the first place, they both get utterly lost in society, so that it is a martyrdom to look at them, particularly the elder. He ate his fish with his knife, was dreadfully confused all the time, and presented the oddest appearance. Secondly, I am sorry that our meetings in the garden have lost almost all their charm and originality. Before, when no one even suspected our chance acquaintance, there was in these rendezvous something forbidden, out of the common. Now, already, alas! it will strike no one as even surprising to have seen us together.

That Lapshine is head over ears in love with me, I have now not the slightest doubt—he has very, almost too eloquent eyes. But he is so modest, so undecided, that, whether I like it or not, I have to meet him halfway. Yesterday, when he was leaving us, I purposely waited for him on the balcony. It was

dark and he began kissing my hands. Ah, dear Lidotchka, in those kisses there was something enchanting. I felt them not only on my hands, but all over my body, along which each kiss ran in a sweet, nervous shiver. At that moment I was very sorry not to be married. I wanted so much to prolong and intensify these new and, to me, unknown sensations.

You, of course, will preach me a sermon for flirting with Lapshine. But this does not tie me to anything and, doubtless, it gives pleasure to him. Besides, in a week at the latest, we are leaving here. For him and for me there will be left memories—and nothing else.

Goodbye, dear Lidotchka, it's a pity that you won't be in Petersburg this season. Give a kiss from me to your little mite of a sister.

Yours ever,

Kate.

September 22nd.

"Is it happiness or only the phantom of happiness?…

What matters it?…"

I don't know which of the poets wrote that, but today I can't get it out of my head.

And it's true; what does it matter? If I have been happy, even for an hour, even for one brief moment, why should I poison it with doubts, distrust, the eternal questions of suspicious self-esteem?

Just before the evening, Kate came out into the garden. I was

waiting for her and we went along the thick alley, that very same alley where I saw for the first time my incomparable Kate, the queen of my heart. She was moody and answered my questions often at random. I asked them indeed without much meaning, but only to avoid burdening both of us with silent pauses. But her eyes did not avoid mine; they looked at me with such tenderness.

When we had reached *the* bench, I said: “How dear and unforgettable this place is to me, Melle Kate.”

“Why?” she asked.

“It was here that I met you for the first time. You remember? You were sitting here with your friend and you even burst out laughing when I passed by.”

“Oh, yes, naturally I remember,” Kate exclaimed, and her face lit up with a smile. “It was stupid of us to laugh aloud like that. Perhaps you thought that it was meant for you?”

“To tell the truth, I did.”

“You see how suspicious you are! That’s not nice of you. It happened simply like this: when you passed I whispered something to Lydia. It really was about you, but I don’t want to repeat it, as an extra compliment might make you unbearable. Lydia stopped me for fear of your catching the words. She is very *prude* and always stops my little outbursts. Then, to tease her, I imitated the voice of my former governess—a very old, stuck-up Miss—‘for shame, *shocking*, for shame.’ There, that’s all, and this little bit of buffoonery made us laugh out loud. Well, are you pleased now?”

“Perfectly. But what did you say about me?”

Kate shook her head with an air of sly reproach.

“You are much too curious and I won’t tell you anything. As it is, I am much too good to you. Don’t forget, please, that you must be punished for your behaviour yesterday.”

I understood that she had no idea of getting angry, but, so as to be prepared for anything, I lowered my head with a guilty air and said with affected distress:

“Forgive me, Melle Kate, I was carried away; my feelings were too much for me.”

And as she did not interrupt me I went on in a still lower but at the same time passionate tone:

“You are so beautiful, Melle Kate.”

The moment was favourable. Kate appeared to be waiting for me to go on, but a sudden timidity seized me and I only asked pleadingly, as I looked into her eyes: “You’re not really angry with me, are you? Tell me. … This tortures me so much.”

“No, I’m not angry.” Kate whispered, turning her head away with a bashful and unconsciously pretty movement.

Well now, the moment has come, I said to myself encouragingly. Forward, forward! One can’t stop halfway in love. Be more daring.

But daring had decidedly left me, and this silence of hers, after words that had been almost a confession, became heavier and heavier. Probably, just because of this, Kate said goodbye to me, as we reached the end of the alley for the second time.

When she gave me her small, delicate, but firm hand, I kept it in my own and looked enquiringly into her eyes. I thought that I saw a silent consent in them. I began once more to kiss that dear little hand, as passionately as I had done on the terrace. At first, Kate resisted and called me disobedient, but the next moment I felt a deep warm breath on my hair, and my cheek was swiftly brushed by those fresh, charming little lips. In the same second—I hadn't even time to draw myself up—she slipped out of my hands, ran a few steps away and stopped only when she was at a safe distance.

"Kate, wait, Kate, for heaven's sake! I have such a lot to say to you," I exclaimed as I approached her.

"Stay where you are and be silent," Kate ordered, frowning with her eyebrows and tapping her foot impatiently on the rustling leaves.

I stopped. Kate put her hand to her mouth and made of it a kind of speaking trumpet as, bending slightly forward, she whispered softly but clearly: "Tomorrow, as soon as the moon is up; wait for me on the wharf. I will slip out quietly. We'll go out on the lake and you shall tell me all you want to tell me. You understand? You understand me?"

After these words, she turned away quickly in the direction of the garden door without once glancing back. As for me, I stood there gazing after her, lost, deeply stirred, and happy.

Kate, dear Kate, if only your position and mine in the world were the same! However, they say that love is higher than class distinctions or any prejudices. But no, no, I will remain strong

and self-sacrificing.

Oh, my God, how swiftly they fly away, my poor, naive, comic dreams! As I write these lines, the captain is lying in his bed, playing on his guitar and singing hoarsely an old, old song.

Miserable little man, I say to myself; in order not to stuff your head with idle and unrealisable rubbish, sit down and, for your own punishment, write these lines:

A young army lieutenant

Began to make love to me.

And my heart throbbed for him

In strange and fatal passion.

My darling mother heard

That I was not against wedding.

And, smiling, said to me:

“Listen, my dearest daughter;

The young army lieutenant

Wants to deceive you.

From his evil hand

It will be hard to escape.”

The young army lieutenant

Shed torrents of tears.

Somehow, at early dawn,

He drove to the neighbouring town.

There, in the wooden chapel,

Under the icon of God,

Some pope or other, half drunk,

Wedded and yoked our hearts.

And then on a peasant's cart

He carried me home.

Ah, how the glamour has fled;

I moan through my tears.

There is no sugar, no tea,

There is neither wine nor beer;

That is how I understand

That I am a lieutenant's wife.

That is how I understand

That I am a lieutenant's wife.

Yes, yes, shame on you, poor army lieutenant! Tear your hair. Weep, weep through the stillness of the night. Thank you, Captain, for that wise lesson of yours.

September 24th.

Night, and love, and the moon, as Mme. Riabkova, the wife of the commander of the 2nd platoon, sings on our regimental guest nights. Never in my most daring dreams did I venture to imagine such intoxicating happiness. I even doubt if the whole evening was not a dream—a dear, magical, but deceptive dream. I don't even know myself how this almost imperceptible, but bitter, sediment of disillusion came into my soul.

I got down to the wharf late. Kate was waiting for me, seated on the high stone balustrade which borders the wharf.

“Well, shall we start?” I asked. Kate pulled her wrap closely over her and shuddered nervously.

“Oh no, it’s too cold; look what a fog there is on the water.”

The dark surface of the lake, indeed, could be seen only for a distance of about five feet. Further off, uneven, fantastical tufts of grey fog swept over the water.

“Let us walk about the garden,” Kate said.

We started. In this mysterious hour of a misty autumn night the deserted garden looked sad and strange, like a neglected cemetery. The moon shone pale. The shadows of the naked trees lay across the paths in black, deceptive silhouettes. The swish of the leaves beneath our feet startled us.

When we emerged from the dark, and seemingly damp, archway of acacias, I put my arm round Kate’s waist and gently, but insistently, drew her to me. She made no resistance. Her light, supple, warm body only started slightly under the touch of my hand, that was burning, as if in fever. In another minute, her head was on my shoulder and I caught the sweet aroma of her loosened hair.

“Kate… I’m so happy… I love you so, Kate, I adore you.”

We stopped. Kate’s arms went round my neck. My lips were moistened and burned by a kiss, so long, so passionate that the blood mounted to my head and I staggered. The moon was shining tenderly right into Kate’s face, into that pale, almost blanched face. Her eyes had grown larger, had become

enormous, and, at the same time, so dark, so deep under their long eyelashes, like mysterious abysses. And her moist lips were clamouring for still more of those insatiable torturing kisses.

“Kate, darling.… You are mine?… quite mine?”

“Yes… quite… quite.”

“Forever?”

“Yes, yes, my dear one.”

“We will never part, Kate?”

Her expression changed. “Why do you ask that? Are you not happy with me just now?”

“Oh, Kate!”

“Well then, why ask about what will come later? Live in the present, dear.”

Time ceased. I could not realise how many minutes or hours had passed, Kate was the first to come back to reality and, as she slipped out of my arms, she said:

“It’s late. They’ll discover my absence. See me home, Alesha.”

While we walked once more through the dark alley of acacias, she nestled against me, like a graceful kitten that dreads the cold.

“I should be frightened to be alone here, Alesha. How strong you are! Put your arms round me. Again… tighter, tighter.… Take me up in your arms, Alesha… Carry me.”

She was as light as a little feather. As I held her, I almost ran

with her along the alley, and Kate's arms wound round my neck still more clingingly, still more nervously. Kissing my neck and temples, and enveloping my face with her quick, burning breath, she kept whispering:

"Faster, faster still.... Ah, how nice, how exquisite! Alesha, faster!"

At the garden door we said goodbye.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked, while I, after bowing, began to kiss her hands one after the other.

"I'm going to write my diary," I answered.

"A diary?" Her face expressed surprise, and—as it seemed to me—annoyed surprise. "Do you write a diary?"

"Yes. Perhaps you don't like that?"

She gave a forced laugh.

"It depends on how you do it.... Of course you'll show me this diary of yours, some time or other?"

I tried to refuse, but Kate insisted so strongly that at last I had to promise.

"Now, understand," she said, as we parted and she held up her finger threateningly, "if I see even a single correction, look out!"

When I got home, I banged the door and the captain woke up, grumbling.

"Where are you always gallivanting about like this, Lieutenant? It's a rendezvous, I suppose? Nobility and all that sort of thing...."

I've just read over all the nonsense that I've been scribbling in this book from the very beginning of September. No, no, Kate shall not see my diary, or I should have to blush for myself every time that I remembered it. Tomorrow I shall destroy it.

September 25th.

Once more night, once more moon, and again the strange and, for me, inexplicable mingling of the intoxication of love and the torture of wounded pride. It is no dream. Someone's footsteps are sounding under the window. …

Kate to Lydia.

September 28th.

My Angel, Lidotchka,

My little romance is coming to a peaceful end. Tomorrow we leave Olkhovatka. I purposely did not tell Lapshine because—one never knows—he might turn up at the station. He is a very sensitive young man and, on the top of it all, he hasn't the faintest notion of controlling his feelings. I think he would be quite capable of bursting into tears at the station. Our romance turned out a very simple and, at the same time, a very original one. It was original because the man and woman had exchanged their conventional roles, I was attacking; he was defending himself. He was asking from me oaths of fidelity, almost beyond the tomb. At the end, he bored me a good deal. He is a man who does not belong to our circle. His manners and habits are not ours. His very language is different. At the same time, he is too exacting. To spare his feelings, I never even hinted to him how impossible it would have been for Papa

to receive him, if he had presented himself in the light of a prospective son-in-law.

The foolish fellow! He himself did not want to prolong these oppressive delights of unsatisfied love. There is something charming in them. To lose one's breath in tight embraces and burn slowly with passion—what can be better than this? But then how do I know? Perhaps there are caresses more daring, more languishing, of which I have no idea. Ah, if he had only had in him a touch of that daring, that inventiveness, and … that depravity which I have divined in many of my Petersburg acquaintances!

But he, instead of becoming every day more and more enterprising, whined, sighed, talked bitterly about the difference in our positions (as if I would ever consent to marry him!), hinted almost at suicide. As I said before, it was becoming almost intolerable. Only one, one solitary meeting has remained vividly in my memory—that was when he carried me in his arms along the garden, and he, at all events, was silent. Lidotchka, among other things, he blurted out to me that he keeps a diary. This frightened me. Heaven knows into whose hands this diary might fall later on. I insisted that he should give it to me. He promised, but he did not keep his word. Then (a few days ago), after a long night walk and after having said goodbye to him, I crept up to his window. I caught him in the very act. He was writing, and when I called out he was startled. His first movement was to conceal the paper, but, you understand, I ordered him to hand over all that was written. Well, my dear, it's so funny and touching, and there

are so many pitiful words.… I'll keep this diary for you.

Don't reproach me. I'm not afraid on his account—he won't shoot himself; and I'm not afraid on my own account either: he will be solemnly silent all his life. Still, I confess, for some reason or other, I feel vaguely sad.… But all this will pass in Petersburg, like the impression of a bad dream.

I kiss you, my beloved one. Write to me in Petersburg.

Your K.